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WS

21 September 1964

MEMORANDUM FOR THE RECORD

SUBJECT: Discussion with Mr. Bundy

1. On Friday afternoon in connection with the Tonkin Gulf episode, Mr. Mac Bundy asked me for my appraisal of the situation. I told him that on the basis of information available to us, and so far as I know available to the whole community, I was prepared to accept the fact that the destroyers had fired on actual targets. I pointed out, however, that there were a great many discrepancies in the various pieces of information and that there was much left to be answered. I told him there was no indication of an increase in NVN traffic at the time nor any lighting up of the Christmas tree on the enemy side. I told him there was much confusion as to whether the reported rates of enemy travel (i. e., closing speeds) were relative or absolute and it could easily be that if these were relative speeds, the destroyers were in fact firing on junks or sailboats. I told him I could see nothing antagonistic in the NVN traffic and in fact, quite the contrary, it was basically defensive. I told him that there had been indications available to the destroyers that the NVN had instructions to fight and that in this atmosphere the local U. S. commander might well be on the jumpy side and in fact there was a possibility that the American commander had been "trigger happy." My general position was that there was considerable doubt that the U. S. side had been menaced or was under any kind of attack but that this was a matter for the field commander best to judge under the circumstances at the time.

2. About an hour later I received a call from Secretary McNamara who asked my appraisal of the situation and who probed rather deeply on several of my views expressed above. I stuck to them, however, but did not mention the phrase "trigger

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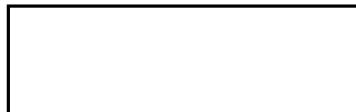
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happy." It is possible that McNamara's call to me (a rather unusual action in the light of our past relationships) might have been generated by a conversation between Bundy and McNamara. In any event, I did not change my position.

3. At the meeting on Saturday with other Cabinet members and the President, I maintained the same position but again without mentioning the possibility of "trigger happy." It would appear that subsequent events and calmer analysis has supported my position -- or at least not denied it.

4. The foregoing conversations were passed in considerable detail to R. J. Smith who agreed.



Marshall S. Carter
Lieutenant General, USA
Acting Director

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Luncheon on Monday, 21 September, at 12:30 - DCI Small Dining Room
Purpose: To hear Mr. Helms' report of his trip

Those invited:

General Carter

Mr. Helms -- accepted

Mr. Kirkpatrick -- cannot attend; will be at ISO for Mid-Career Course

Dr. Wheelon -- cannot attend; will be leaving Monday for [redacted]

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Mr. Karamessines -- accepted

Mr. R. J. Smith -- accepted

[redacted] -- accepted

Mr. Kent -- accepted

Mr. Abbot Smith -- accepted

Mr. Knoche -- accepted

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Total to be present: 8